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U. S. Department of Agriculture

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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Monday, April 8, 1935.

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SUBJECT: "Buying Spring Foods." Information from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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To market, to market on a Monday morning. But before you go, here are some market hints from the experts to help you get your money's worth when you buy spring foods.

You know, lots of housekeepers who can cook to the queen's taste aren't always so wise at buying. A little advice from the marketing specialists can help us make a good selection. One good general rule for getting your money's worth is: Buy fresh foods when they are in season. Of course, nowadays city people can buy almost any food at any season -- strawberries in December, say, or asparagus in January. Our modern rapid transportation and refrigeration make that possible. But out-of-season food is almost always more expensive. And then, if it comes from a considerable distance, you can hardly expect it to have the same flavor as food just out of the garden.

Well, let's see what in-season food we're likely to find at the market this season. Among the new vegetables are asparagus and greens of various kinds; among the new fruits, rhubarb and strawberries.

Many people nowadays have gardens of their own to supply their tables with fresh fruits and vegetables. But if you must go to market to purchase such items, you need to know various indications of freshness and quality.

Take asparagus, for example. Here's a spring vegetable that ages rapidly after cutting. The tips spread on standing and the stalks become tough and woody. So if you want to avoid tough asparagus, the first thing to avoid is old asparagus. The younger and fresher the stems, the more tender they'll be. So before you buy see if each stalk in the bunch is tender and firm with a close compact tip. A tender stalk will be brittle -- break with a snap. And it will be easy to puncture. If the asparagus looks wilted or has a spreading tip, it has probably been cut for some time and will be tough except at the very tip. A good buy in asparagus is a bunch of stalks that are fairly plump in appearance; are six to ten inches long, have a deep green color from the tip almost to the base; and are very tender except for an inch or so at the base. Stalks showing a long stretch of white at the base will have a good deal of tough material. And stalks that are long and angular you will probably find very stringy.

There. That's all the advice I have to give you on buying asparagus. Now let's consider spring greens. Nowadays most markets have some kind of fresh greens for sale almost the year around. I can mention offhand about 14 varieties that appear at one time of year or another -- beet and turnip tops,



broccoli, chard, chicory, collards, cress, dandelion, endive, escarole, kale, mustard, sorrell and spinach. Among the most popular spring greens are dandelion and mustard greens, cress, and beet and turnip tops. Well, whatever kind you are buying, remember that the best buys in greens are those that are fresh, young, crisp and tender. The tender new leaves and stems are always the most delicious. Avoid seed stems. They're usually old and tough. Avoid flabby or wilted plants and leaves. And avoid leaves damaged by insects or those that show a good deal of sand or dirt. Who wants to pay good money for sand? And who wants to spend good springtime hours washing it off? Here's another point. Avoid coarse stems and avoid dry or yellowish leaves. If you buy greens with these defects, you're paying for waste goods. When you start fixing the greens for dinner, you may find that over half your purchase is only fit to throw away.

So much for asparagus and greens. Now a few pointers about the spring fruits we mentioned.

Strawberries first. Here's a case where you pick the winner by looks. Look for berries that are clean and fresh looking, that are bright in color -- solid red all over, free from moisture and dirt and sand. Also choose those that have their hulls attached. Small mis-shaped berries aren't a good choice. They're usually poor in flavor and they often have hard, green, unripe spots. Overripe berries are just as poor a buy. Overripe berries, or those that have stood too long will look dull and lusterless and sometimes shrunken. They usually have moist, spoiled-looking spots. No matter if the price sounds like a bargain, you are buying waste when you buy old or overripe or damaged berries. By the way, if the basket holding the berries is very stained, you can make a safe bet that the berries are soft or have been handled roughly. Strawberries without their caps are usually a poor buy -- will soon spoil. And those that have mold showing on the outside are decaying.

Now about rhubarb or pie-plant. Once again, pick stalks that are fresh, firm, crisp and tender, also those that are plump and have a red or pink color. Generally a rich color indicates a good flavor. Stale rhubarb has a wilted flabby look and will probably be stringy and poor in taste after cooking. Stalks that are allowed to grow too long before cutting are pithy, tough and stringy. Old rhubarb and stale rhubarb are both poor buys. You can test for tenderness by puncturing the stalk.

In general, remember that all those early products -- fruits or vegetables -- are delicate in structure, are easily bruised and age quickly on standing. The good buys are crisp, tender, and clear in color. So pick them young, tender and innocent.

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